

**SUMMER 2024**

# **STATE OF THE SOUTH**

**VOTING RIGHTS UNDER ASSAULT**



**SOUTHERN  
COALITION**  
for SOCIAL JUSTICE

**SOLVE**

# WHERE WE ARE... & HOW WE GOT HERE

REPORT BY SARAH OVASKA, SOLVE SENIOR COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIST

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- The Right to Vote .....3
- Scope of Voter Suppression in the South .....6
  - Harm to Black Voters & Voters of Color .....6
- At a Glance: Voting Rights in the South by State .... 12
  - Voter Registration Challenges.....14
  - Photo and Voter ID .....16
  - Mail-In/Absentee Voting Access.....16
  - Early Voting Access.....18
  - Felony Disenfranchisement .....20
  - Criminalization of Voting.....22
  - Unfair Voting Maps.....23
  - Prison Gerrymandering .....24
  - Solutions.....26
- State-by-State Review of Voting Access.....28
  - Alabama.....30
  - Florida.....32
  - Georgia.....34
  - Louisiana.....36
  - Mississippi.....38
  - North Carolina.....40
  - South Carolina.....42
  - Tennessee.....44
  - Texas.....46
  - Virginia.....48
- Endnotes ..... 50

### MULTIRACIAL DEMOCRACY

A political system that ensures individuals from all ethnic and racial groups can participate in all levels of democracy. Coalitions of non-white voters are key to this effort in the United States.

## THE RIGHT TO VOTE

The right to vote is the foundation of our democracy. But to truly be a **multiracial democracy**, we must all be able to participate, regardless of race or background.

Our democracy is in crisis, with a resurgence of voter suppression tactics spreading across the country over the last decade that harken back to the days of Jim Crow. The result is that, after decades of progress, it is more difficult for communities of color to participate in our democracy.

No region of the country has been more affected by this dangerous retreat from equitable voting access than the South, which for the purposes of this report covers a 10-state footprint: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

In these states, we at the Southern Leadership for Voter Engagement (SOLVE), a project under Southern Coalition for Social Justice, have seen voters of color targeted over the last decade with repressive laws and policies that undermine the hard-fought progress secured during the Civil Rights era. These steps backward have included new barriers to voter registration, fewer and less accessible polling places, discriminatory voter identification requirements, and continued refusals to restore the voting rights of the formerly incarcerated.

The push to restrict access surged again following the 2020 election, buoyed by the dangerous (and widely disproven) claims of a stolen election put forth by former President Donald Trump and associates of his.

**This attack on voting rights is far from new.** This summer marks the 60th anniversary of the 1964 Freedom Rides, when brave college students and activists faced violence to register Black voters in Mississippi. Three civil rights volunteers — James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner — were abducted and killed in the first week of the campaign, but the effort continued.

The violence and resistance Black Mississippians and civil rights volunteers faced that summer helped lead to the passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, the landmark legislation that has been the cornerstone of the civil rights movement.

The VRA made clear that extraordinary action was needed to stamp out discrimination and the violent attempts to uphold white supremacy in the South by both governmental entities and private citizens. The VRA included a preclearance requirement in areas where there had been histories of race-based voter suppression. Federal approval was needed ahead of any election law changes and policies in states like Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas to ensure there would not be a discriminatory effect on voters of color. Parts of Florida and a large portion of North Carolina were also subject to preclearance.

Decades later, in a devastating blow to our fundamental rights, Chief Justice John Roberts authored an opinion for the Supreme Court that shredded the VRA's preclearance requirement in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013).



**“Throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.”**

*Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg*

In her dissent, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg took aim at the stance that race-based discrimination was no longer a concern. She wrote: “[t]hrowing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.”

The rainstorm of voter suppression, as predicted, has only increased in intensity with more than 100 laws restricting voting access passing in 29 states (including all 10 Southern states) since the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision, according to the Brennan Center.

### DIFFICULT LEGAL LANDSCAPE

- The U.S. Supreme Court further empowered state politicians to diminish the collective voting power of Black and non-white communities through partisan gerrymandered voting maps in *Alexander v. S.C. NAACP* (2024).
- The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit in 2023 rejected the VRA’s private right of action in an Arkansas case that individual voters and advocacy groups have long depended on.
- The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit is considering doing away with the coalition claims in VRA cases after Black and Latinx voters came together to challenge discriminatory voting maps in Galveston, Texas.

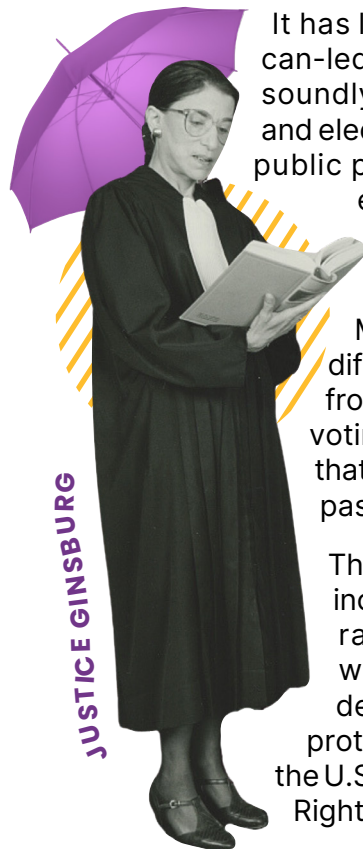
**This multi-pronged attack on voting rights has considerably harmed voters in the South.** Voters have faced increased barriers to register to vote, fewer early voting opportunities and manipulated voting maps that entrench political power against the will of the people.

This has correlated with low voter turnout — less than half of eligible voters in

It has largely come from Republican-led states where the false and soundly disproven claims of voter and election fraud have undermined public perception of the country’s electoral system and brought overt white supremacy tactics back into the open.

Meanwhile, divisive partisan differences have kept Congress from passing meaningful federal voting rights protections, efforts that were always bipartisan in the past.

The federal courts have become increasingly reluctant to uphold racial discrimination claims, with a string of recent appellate decisions chipping away at the protections once afforded under the U.S. Constitution and the Voting Rights Act.



JUSTICE GINSBURG

# The South

# has the nation’s lowest voter turnout.



### VOTER TURNOUT, 2022 ELECTIONS

**48.9%**

South

**53.8%**

Northeast

**54.1%**

Midwest

**54.7%**

West

the South participated in the 2022 mid-terms, according to information collected by the U.S. Census.

Most affected are Black, Latino, Asian, Native American voters, and those with disabilities — groups who have long had their rights trampled on and today face disproportionate barriers to register to vote, access polling places, or vote by mail. On top of that, the targeting of Black and Brown voting power throughout the Black Belt and in Texas have all but eliminated fair and competitive voting districts in the South’s state legislatures and in Congress.

The result is lopsided power imbalances from unfair voting maps at the local, state, and federal levels that silence Black and Brown communities and keep voters from seeking the changes they want in their communities. One result of this is low voter turnout, including in primaries where a fraction of eligible voters are making choices about who will be on the ballot, and in office.

## SCOPE OF VOTER SUPPRESSION IN THE SOUTH

As we head into the 2024 presidential election, we find ourselves at yet another crossroads in our nation. Some parts of our country have steadily expanded access to the ballot, with robust voter registration, early voting and vote-by-mail options. But not so in the South where access to the ballot has been steadily eroded.

The effect of this steady increase of voter suppression tactics on voters of color is becoming clear: the race turnout gap is growing, with an increased divide between white and non-white voters. A recent study by the Brennan Center found the turnout gap is growing most rapidly

in those states that used to be subject to the preclearance requirements that were taken away after the Supreme Court’s 2013 ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder*.<sup>1</sup>

## HARM TO BLACK VOTERS & VOTERS OF COLOR

This resurgence of voter suppression laws in the South has disproportionately silenced Black America and Black voting power.

The South is home to the most eligible Black voters in the country in terms of both overall numbers as well as percentage of total voters, according to data compiled by Pew Research Center.<sup>2</sup> For example, Texas, with 2.9 million Black voters, leads the nation with the most eligible Black voters, followed by Georgia (2.6 million) and Florida (2.6 million).

It is also in the South where Black voters make up a considerable share of voters — in Mississippi, 37% of the state’s eligible voters are Black, while a third of eligible voters in Georgia and Louisiana are Black, according to Pew Research Center.<sup>3</sup>

That has meant that when the South, as a region, doubled-down in its efforts to suppress voters, it is Black America that has suffered.

The harm goes far beyond Black voters, however.

Latino and Asian-American populations are steadily increasing in the South, as have attempts from the far right to preserve white power structures by erecting barriers to the ballot.

In the South, nearly a third of eligible voters in Texas identify as Latinx, while in Florida, one in five eligible voters is Latinx.<sup>4</sup> Many of the voters who trace their heritage to South and Central America are considered new voters, and tend to be younger overall than white voters.

For instance, 22% of Latinx voters will be casting a ballot in their first presidential election this year.<sup>5</sup>

That makes clarity on when, where and how to vote all the more important — a difficult task in Southern states where there’s been an influx of restrictions on voter registration efforts and reductions in early voting offerings.

Asian-Americans, meanwhile, are the fastest-growing racial group of eligible

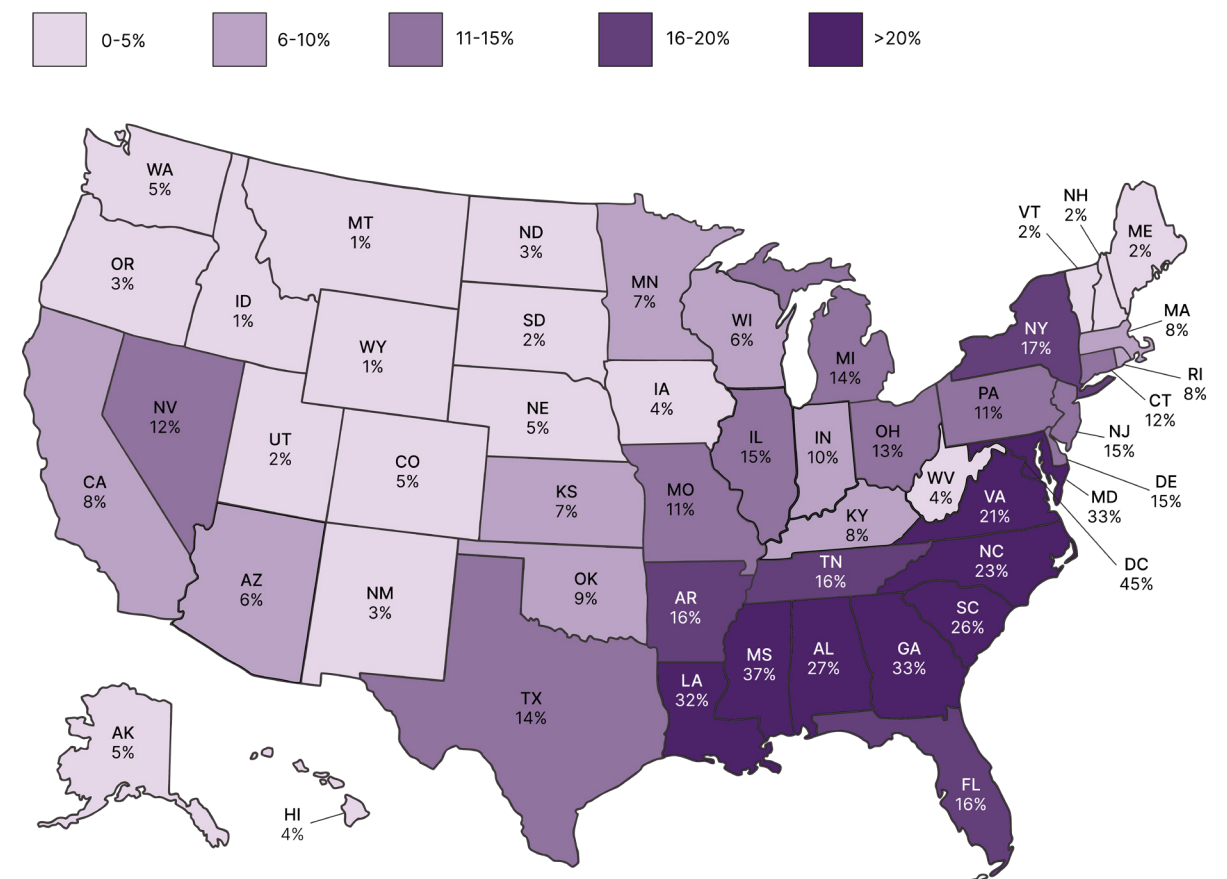
voters in the country — their share of the U.S. eligible voter electorate jumped by 15% from 2020 to 2024, far outpacing the growth of other races and ethnicities.<sup>6</sup>

More than half of Asian-American eligible voters are naturalized citizens, meaning they were often born outside the United States and many do not have English as their first language.<sup>7</sup>

Caught up in the wide net of voter suppression are Black, Latinx, Asian and

U.S. CENSUS, 2022

## PERCENTAGE OF BLACK VOTERS BY STATE



Note: Eligible voters are U.S. citizens ages 18 and older. The Black population includes those who say they are Black alone and non-Hispanic, Black and at least one other race and non-Hispanic, or Black and Hispanic.

### KEY FACT

DC & THE SOUTH have the highest shares of eligible voters who are Black.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Native American voters, from all types of backgrounds. That includes people living in cities or small towns, those who are able-bodied and those with disabilities, young and old.

The SOLVE Network is among those standing up to this assault on voting rights. Housed under Southern Coalition for Social Justice, SOLVE is a multi-state collaborative of more than 200 grassroots organizations dedicated to sharing strategies, resources, and support in the ongoing struggle to protect and

expand voting rights. The mission of the non-partisan SOLVE Network is to provide a space for Southern grassroots and Southern state-based organizations to address, respond to and rectify policies that have weakened the voting strength of communities.

As Matia Powell, the executive director of Civic TN and a member of SOLVE's Leadership Council, has said, "If democracy can be saved, it will be us in the South who save it."



**"If democracy can be saved, it will be us in the South who save it."**

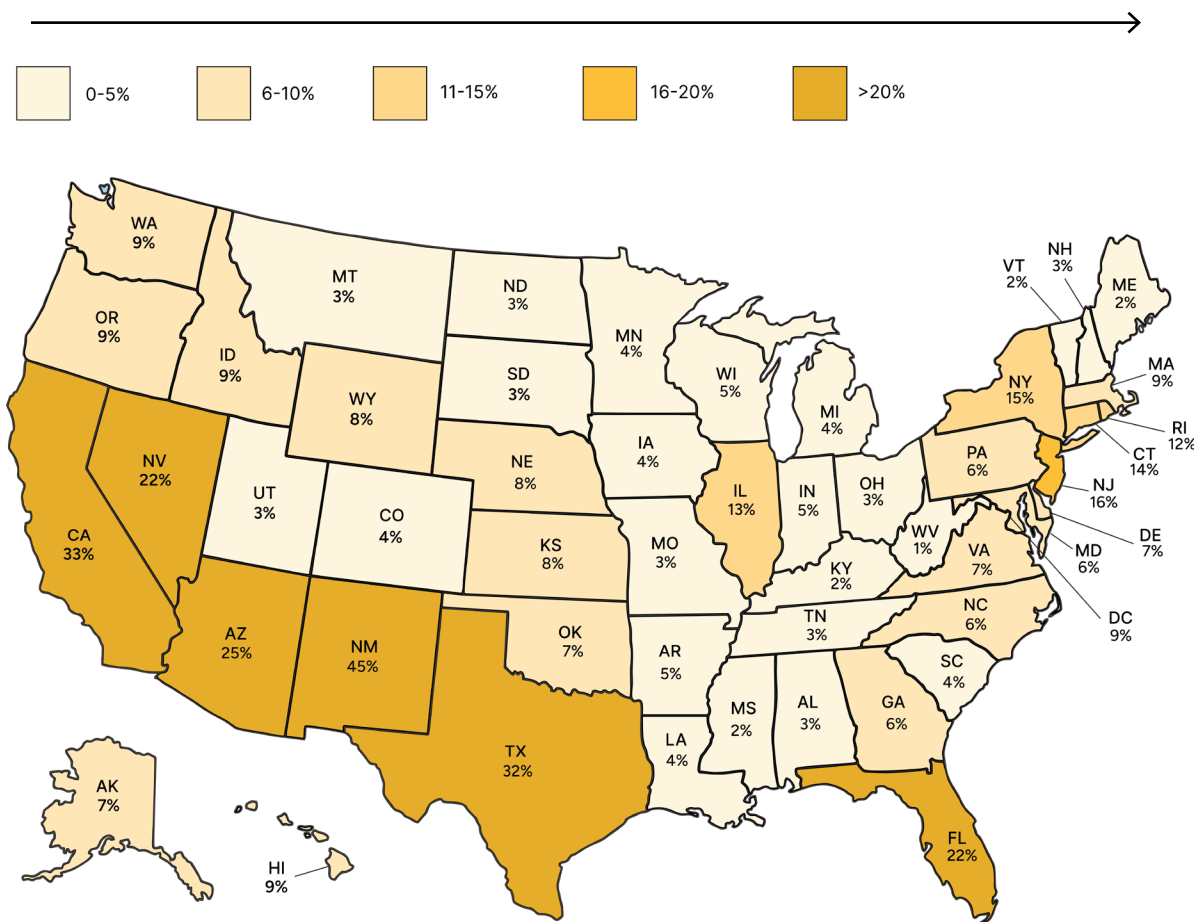
Matia Powell, executive director of Civic TN

In the following pages, we first detail the various barriers to the ballot that voters are facing in the South and how individuals and advocacy groups are responding to defend democracy across the South.

We then turn to a profile of voting in each state, hearing directly from voters and advocates to understand how restrictive voting policies have affected Southern communities and how those communities are fighting back against these undemocratic attempts to limit voting access.

U.S. CENSUS, 2022

# PERCENTAGE OF LATINX VOTERS BY STATE



Note: Eligible voters are U.S. citizens ages 18 and older. Latinos are of any race.

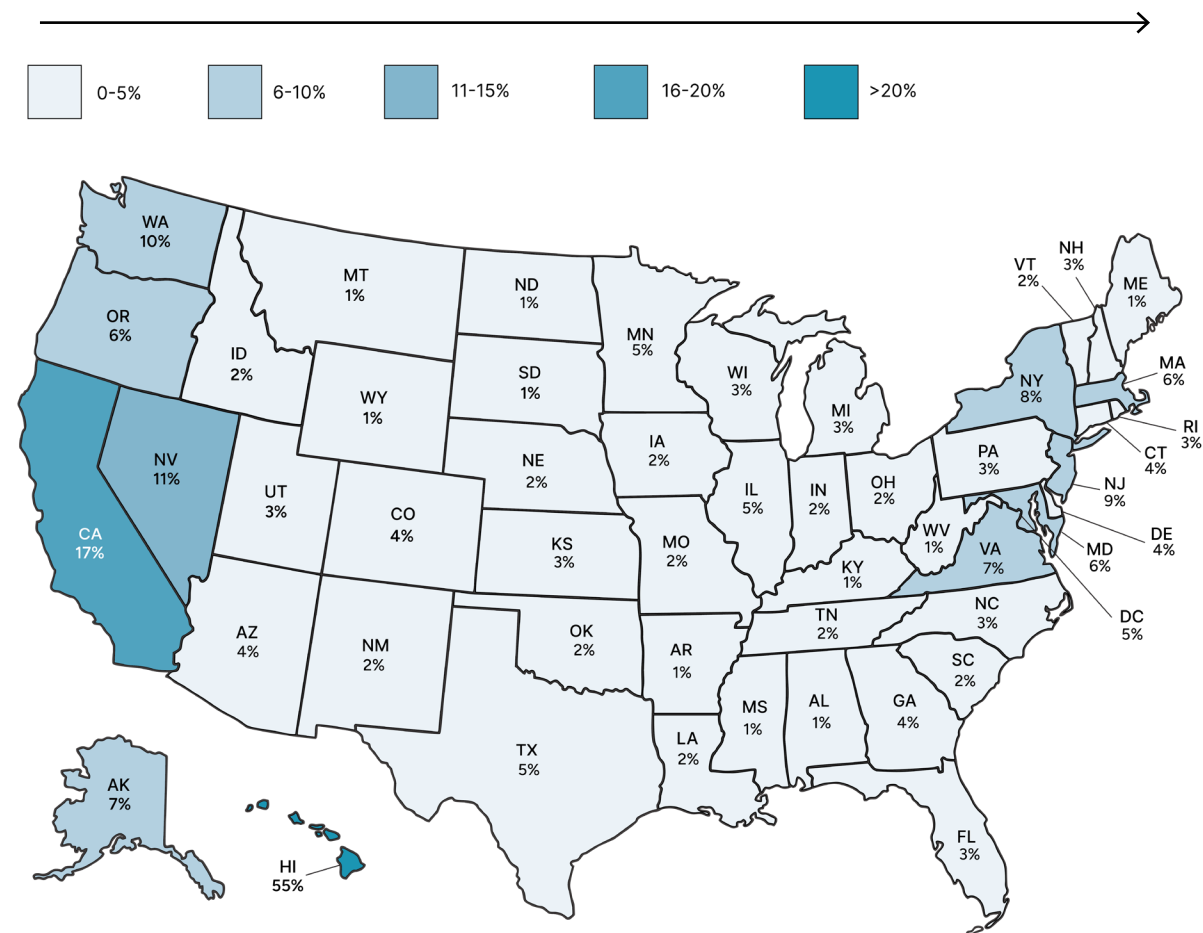
KEY FACT

**32%** of eligible voters in Texas are Latinx.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

U.S. CENSUS, 2022

# PERCENTAGE OF ASIAN VOTERS BY STATE



Note: Eligible voters are U.S. citizens ages 18 and older. Asians include those who say they are Asian alone and non-Hispanic, Asian and at least one other race and non-Hispanic, or Asian and Hispanic.

KEY FACT

**FASTEST** growing group of eligible voters in the U.S. are Asian Americans.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

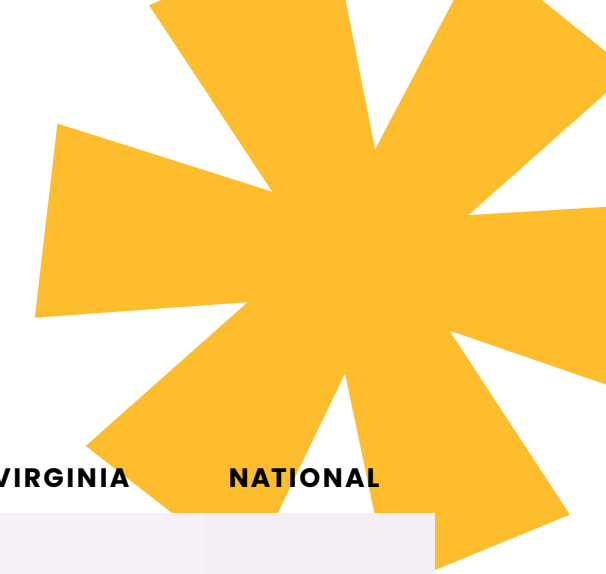


# VOTING RIGHTS IN THE SOUTH

	ALABAMA	FLORIDA	GEORGIA	LOUISIANA	MISSISSIPPI
Percentage of eligible but unregistered voters, 2022 data	33%	37%	31%	32%	27%
Voter turnout, 2022	45%	49%	57%	48%	46%
Youth voter turnout, 2022	15%	22%	26%	16%	20%
Same-day voter registration	No	No	No	No	No
Online voter registration	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Voting rights remain after felony conviction*	No	No**	No	No	No
Turnout gap between white/Black voters (2022 election)	4.00%	(x)	6.50%	6.60%	0.70%
Turnout gap between white/Latino voters (2022 election)	(x)	9.80%	(x)	(x)	(x)
Congressional voting maps challenged in court?	Yes, new maps ordered by court.	Yes, pending litigation.	Yes, new maps ordered by court.	Yes, new maps ordered by court.	Yes, maps upheld in court.
Photo ID requirements?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes



N.C.	S.C.	TENNESSEE	TEXAS	VIRGINIA	NATIONAL
39%	36%	33%	35%	26%	National: 31%
46%	45%	45%	47%	53%	National: 52%
23%	18%	13%	22%	23%	National: 23%
Yes, early voting only	No	No	No	Yes	
Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	
No	No	No	No	No	
6.50%	6.60%	2.20%	(x)	3.50%	
(x)	(x)	(x)	8.20%	(x)	
Yes, pending litigation.	Yes, maps upheld in court.	Yes, pending litigation.	Yes, pending litigation.	No	
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No, allows for non-photo ID.	



## SOURCES

Same-day/online voter registration, NCSL; Unregistered voter and turnout rate, U.S. Census 2022 Voter & Registration Table; Youth voting rate, CIRLCE at Tufts University; Voting ID requirements, NCSL, Vote Riders; Felony disenfranchisement data, NCSL and Sentencing Project; Racial turnout gap, Brennan Center.

\* Voting rights can be restored in some states after the completion of a sentence, but the process can be unclear leading to further disenfranchisement.

\*\* Florida restored the right to vote for those who have completed the terms of their sentence but state officials have interpreted that to include fines and fees, keeping many from voting.

(x) Indicates that data is unavailable.

## VOTER REGISTRATION CHALLENGES

The most significant barriers to vote come at the very start – when people register to vote.

The roots of voter registration are solidly planted in racism, an administrative tool that historically was implemented to make it more difficult for the less educated, poor, and non-white to exercise their right to vote. In the South, voter registration policies replaced Jim Crow-era literacy tests and poll taxes that had been overturned by the courts.

Voter registration rules are particular to each state. Many parts of the country have opted to reduce voter registration barriers with policies like automatic voter registration, online voter registration and same-day voter registration.

Not so in the South. Here, voter registration barriers are collectively more substantial than in any other part of the country. The result: fewer people register to vote and participate in the voting process.

### ONE THIRD

of eligible voters in Alabama, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas are NOT REGISTERED to vote.<sup>8</sup>

U.S. CENSUS, 2022

### ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

Texas and Mississippi are among the seven states in the country without online voter registration — a major obstacle in these states with long histories of election-related discrimination. [The five other states without online voter registration options are Arkansas, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota and Wyoming.]<sup>9</sup>

More importantly, it gets people to the polls to exercise their right to vote. Three years after Georgia implemented automatic voter registration, 681,000 voters were added to the rolls.<sup>12</sup>

New voters in Mississippi, for example, must print or otherwise locate a voter registration application and then either mail it in or deliver it in person to a municipal or circuit court clerk's office or a public service agency like the state's Department of Public Safety.

Texas, meanwhile, is the second-largest state in terms of land mass and population and also home to a booming technology sector, yet it still relies on an antiquated system of paper voter registration forms to permit people to cast a ballot.

Less than 65% of people eligible to vote in Texas are registered to do so, below the national average of 69%.<sup>10</sup>

## RACIAL TURNOUT GAP

The racial turnout gap has steadily increased since 2013 and more than doubled in Southern states previously protected with preclearance requirements under the Voting Rights Act.



**BRENNAN CENTER**  
<https://bit.ly/3zQYQkV>

### AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION

Almost half of the country's states have automatic voter registration in place, where people are automatically registered to vote when interacting with government agencies like the Department of Motor Vehicles. People are given the option to opt out, if they wish.

It's a popular policy, with 70% of people backing automatic voter registration, according to a recent survey from All Voting Is Local.<sup>11</sup>

More importantly, it gets people to the polls to exercise their right to vote. Three years after Georgia implemented automatic voter registration, 681,000 voters were added to the rolls.<sup>12</sup>

## "People are scared of young people voting and scared of people of color voting. They want to stay in power."

Alice Yi, co-founder of Asian Texans for Justice



But this progress has by and large continued to escape most Southern states. Of the Southern states, only Georgia and Virginia have automatic voter registration in place.

### SAME-DAY REGISTRATION

Viewed as a critical way to make voting accessible, same-day registration is available in some form in 22 states and Washington, D.C. – but not in most of the South.<sup>13</sup>

Same-day registration allows a person, whether new to voting or a person who has recently moved to the state, to register to vote and cast their ballot on the same day. A 2021 study found Black and Latinx voter turnout was higher in states with same-day voter registration options than in states without.<sup>14</sup> Young people, as well, are more likely to exercise their right to vote in states with same-day voter registration.<sup>15</sup>

Virginia is the only Southern state to allow voter registration during early voting and on Election Day. North Carolina has same-day registration during the early voting period, but not on Election Day.

The addition of same-day registration in Virginia has been a game changer for people who are new to voting or the state, said Marcia "Cia" Price, director of the Virginia Black Leadership Organizing Collaborative (BLOC). Price also serves in Virginia's House of Delegates, representing her Newport News community.

"That has immensely helped people," she said about the recent change in Virginia.

In other states, people must register to vote 15 to 30 days in advance of an election — a barrier that locks many out of the voting process, especially if they move often.<sup>16</sup>

### TARGETING OF COMMUNITY-LED VOTER REGISTRATION GROUPS

Many Southern states are trying to stifle voter participation by going after those who help new voters register.

Florida's legislature passed a law in 2023 increasing the fines that "third-party voter registration groups" could receive to up to \$250,000 a year if there are mistakes on voter registration applications. Multiple community groups have pulled back from registration activities for fear of being targeted with fines they can't afford to pay.

The law also prohibits people who aren't U.S. citizens from handling or collecting voter registration forms on behalf of one of those groups. But there's no such requirement for local elections offices.

In addition, in Texas, those who register others must receive training at the county level — another hurdle that people looking to empower their communities must overcome.

### NEXT STEPS

SOLVE network members are working in their individual states to adopt automatic and same-day voter registration policies to increase access to the ballot.



On the federal level, Congress could pass pro-democracy legislation to modernize voter registration.

The Freedom to Vote Act, for example, would require every state to offer same-day voter registration as well as automatic voter registration that registers eligible voters when they interact with government agencies, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles, unless they opt-out.

### PHOTO AND VOTER IDENTIFICATION

Once considered unusual, more states are requiring photo identification to vote, the push accelerated after the 2020 election by disinformation and false claims of widespread voter fraud.

This is making it harder for voters of color and voters with disabilities, and also injecting confusion into the voting process. Multiple studies have shown that strict voter ID laws decrease voter turnout among Black, Native, Latino and Asian voters.<sup>17</sup> A federal circuit court of appeals noted in 2016 that North Carolina's voter identification provisions were written to "target African-Americans with almost surgical precision."<sup>18</sup>

A recent study from VoteRiders found more than a quarter of adult Black and Latinx Americans lacked a driver's li-

cence with their current address on it.<sup>19</sup> While some states make allowances for expired identifications, or those with different addresses than a current residence, that knowledge isn't necessarily widespread and many voters may sit out the election and forfeit their right to vote out of confusion and misunderstanding.

There are now 36 states in the country, including every Southern state, except for Virginia, that require some form of photo identification to vote, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.<sup>20</sup> Some of the strictest requirements are in place in Southern states.

#### NEXT STEPS

SOLVE network members continue to push for less restrictive voter identification policies in their states.

### MAIL-IN/ABSENTEE VOTING ACCESS

Mail-in voting was used heavily in the 2020 election, as the country grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nationally, more than 43% of the U.S. electorate voted by mail in 2020, an incredible increase from 2018, when 23% of American voters cast their ballots by mail, according to data from the U.S. Census.<sup>21</sup>

Many states improved access for that election and kept those improvements, but we have seen several Southern states reverse course and further restrict access.

Most states allow voters to cast a ballot by mail without providing an excuse, a trend that doesn't carry through in the South where voters in Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee and South Carolina can only vote absentee or by mail if it falls under a list of prescribed reasons or circumstances.

# A first-time voter spends an average of

# \$105.53

# to cast a ballot — today's poll tax is keeping some away from the polls.

ALL VOTING IS LOCAL



Louisiana also rolled back a provision this year that previously allowed all voters over 65 to join a permanent mail voter list. Starting next year, those voters will need to renew their requests to vote absentee every four years.

On top of that, legislatures in many of these Southern states have tacked on additional impediments to mail-in or absentee voting. North Carolina now requires scanned copies of photo IDs, Texans must provide driver's license numbers, and there is reduced access to drop-boxes in Georgia, Florida and Mississippi.

This, again, has a disproportionate effect on voters of color.

New laws passed since the 2020 election in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas also make it more difficult to prepare to collect and turn in ballots — and threaten those who help with criminal penalties. These so-called “ballot harvesting” laws, intended to address repeatedly disproven claims of voter fraud, leave a chilling effect on the nonpartisan and civic groups that have long aided voters in need of assistance.

South Carolina limits the return of absentee ballots to five total in addition to a person's own. Anything more is a felony crime with a punishment of up to five years in prison.<sup>22</sup>

These limitations are making it harder for those who are homebound, without reliable transportation, or residing in congregate living facilities such as nursing homes or assisted living facilities to have their votes counted across the South.

Civil rights and disability rights groups have challenged these so-called “ballot harvesting” laws passed to address repeatedly disproven claims of voter fraud — but expect the threat of prosecution to have a chilling effect on get out the vote efforts.

In Mississippi, for example, a federal judge agreed with a group of civil rights and disability rights groups that a 2023 Mississippi ballot harvesting law violated the Voting Rights Act given that it states that people who have disabilities, or can't read or write, must be able to have a person of their choice assist them in the voting process. The Mississippi legislature, as a result, passed a new law in 2024 that allows voters who need assistance due to disability, blindness or the inability to read or write to have a person help them deliver and return their absentee mail-in ballot.

**NEXT STEPS**

*SOLVE network members are pushing for equitable vote-by-mail policies on the state level.*

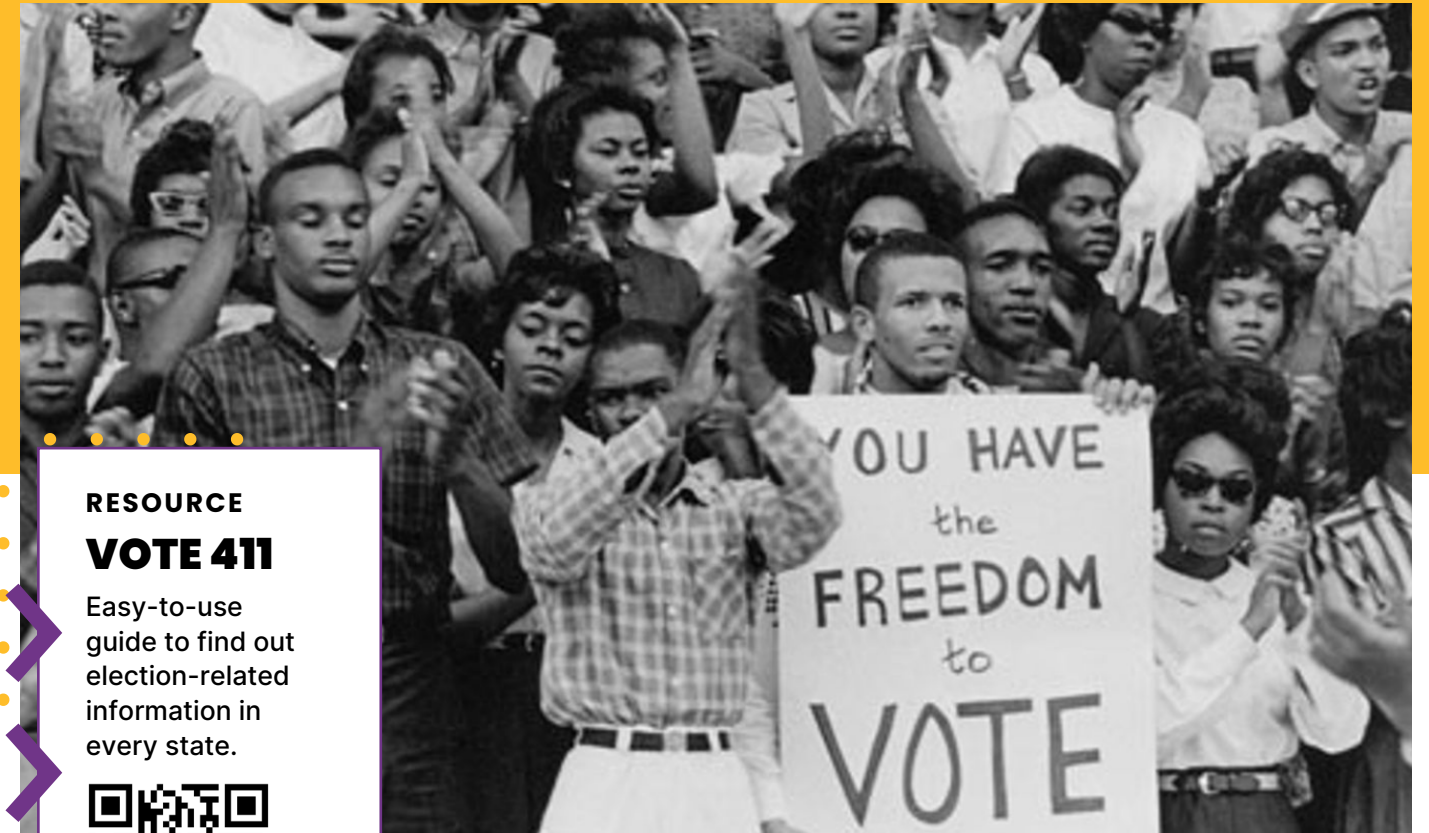
*The Freedom to Vote Act, if it were to pass Congress, would:*

- allow people to vote by mail, without excuses or reasons needed;
- let voters request those ballots online;
- stop states from requiring additional copies of identification documents;
- get rid of provisions that ballots be notarized or signed by witnesses;
- require secure and clearly labeled ballot drop boxes for voters to use;
- require ballots be accepted if post-marked by Election Day and received up to seven days following an Election.

*The Native American Voting Rights Act would also increase the numbers of ballot drop boxes on Indian lands and expand access to absentee voting for those living on Tribal lands.*

**EARLY VOTING ACCESS**

Alabama and Mississippi are two of three states that don't have any type of in-person early voting. (New Hampshire is the third.)<sup>23</sup>



**RESOURCE  
VOTE 411**

Easy-to-use guide to find out election-related information in every state.



**LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS**  
<https://vote411.org>

This leaves most voters with two choices — casting their ballot in person on Election Day or via mail. Mississippi also allows in-person absentee voting, but limits that to people with specific excuses, such as having to work during the hours polls are open on Election Day, being out of town, or being over 65 or disabled.

There is some hope that the ban on early voting may change. Mississippi had bipartisan support for a bill establishing 15 days of early voting advance in the 2024 legislative session, but it did not pass before the close of the legislative session.

Other states have established early voting dates, but anti-voter restrictions following the 2020 election have decreased the times and places available to voters.

In Texas, for example, a law taking effect in 2024 requires the state's 254 counties,

regardless of size, to extend early voting hours at all locations. But without funding attached to it, many rural counties are having to close down early voting sites.<sup>24</sup> One South Texas county, San Patricio County, closed half of its early voting locations for 2024 elections as a result.

Georgia increased options for early voting in 2020, but limited the number of ballot drop boxes and required that they only be accessible during early voting hours.

**NEXT STEPS**

*States can improve voter turnout by expanding early voting offerings and, in the cases of Mississippi and Alabama, begin offering in-person early voting options.*

*Here, again, federal legislation such as the Freedom to Vote Act would improve access by requiring each state to hold at least 13 days of voting, including on Saturdays and Sundays. It would also make Election Day a holiday.*

## FELONY DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Every state in the South takes away people’s voting rights upon conviction of felony crimes, though the specifics vary from state to state in terms of what convictions trigger the disenfranchisement and how rights are restored.

The impact of this disenfranchisement falls heaviest upon Black communities, where higher rates of prosecution and imprisonment have resulted from the racist inequities that persist at every stage of the criminal legal system. One in 19 Black adults are unable to vote in the United States because of a felony conviction, 3.5 times the rate of other racial and ethnic groups, according to a 2022 estimate by the Sentencing Project.<sup>25</sup>

In Florida, Rosemary McCoy hasn’t voted since 2018, though she was given a voter registration card years ago by her local supervisor of elections declaring her eligible to vote. She’s held off because McCoy, founder of the Harriet Tubman Freeman Fighters advocacy group, has a conviction in her past, and is now worried she could be arrested and charged with a voting-related crime if it turns out she still owes fees and fines. That, after all, is happening in Florida, where a criminal elections taskforce in Gov. Ron DeSantis’ administration arrested dozens of people with criminal pasts many of whom

have said local election officials indicated they were eligible to vote. Other states have removed the hurdles that justice-impacted individuals face in restoring their rights.

### ONE IN 19

Black adults are unable to vote in the United States because of a felony conviction.

### SENTENCING PROJECT, 2022

But that progress has by and large escaped the Southern states, where instead several states have opted to make it even harder for those with criminal pasts to have a voice in the future of their communities.

Among the backward march:

- Virginia permanently takes away a person’s voting rights for felony convictions and leaves only the narrowest of windows to restore it, after Gov. Glenn Youngkin in 2023 rescinded a policy that more easily restored voting rights after completion of a felony sentence. Now, only he can restore a person’s voting rights in an arbitrary process that groups like the NAACP are challenging in court.
- Florida voters elected to restore people’s voting rights in 2018 but that progress was muted by a subsequent legislation that required people to pay all court fees, fines and restitution to vote, a process that can be impossible to discern under the state’s court system. **Florida now leads the nation in**

**“I am a taxpayer, but I don’t have representation and I don’t have a voice. They have taken us way back. Being unable to vote, losing your civil rights — to me, that’s a [type] of enslavement.”**

*Rosemary McCoy, founder of the Harriet Tubman Freeman Fighters*



**disenfranchisement**, with 1.15 million people unable to cast a ballot, 80% of whom are left out because of owed fees and fines, according to the Sentencing Project.

- North Carolina’s state Supreme Court, after a shift in political makeup in 2023, reversed a prior court ruling in an unprecedented action, taking away the restored voting rights of more than 56,000 people who were finishing out their probation and parole sentences.<sup>26</sup>
- Tennessee’s confusing and restrictive voting restoration policies make the state second in disenfranchisement, topped only by Florida. **More than 9% of the state’s voting age population and one in five Black Tennesseans are unable to vote because of past felony convictions.**<sup>27</sup>
- Additionally in Tennessee, people must have paid all court fees and fines, and be current on child support obligations in order to have their

voting rights restored—financial and bureaucratic hurdles that can be insurmountable for some.

This patchwork of changes from state to state is confusing to voters, and the increased restrictions have made it difficult for many to know how, when or if they are eligible to vote. These strict policies in the South disproportionately silence communities of color, given the racial inequities rampant in the criminal legal system, and prevent people from having a say in the future of their communities.

#### NEXT STEPS

*SOLVE partners are pushing to improve voting access for justice-impacted individuals with state-level reforms.*

*Federal legislation such as the Freedom to Vote Act would create national standards to restore voting rights after a person has left prison, and allow those on probation and parole or who owe court fees to vote.*

## CRIMINALIZATION OF VOTING

There has been an increased effort in Southern states to criminalize the work individuals and nonpartisan civic groups do to ensure voting is accessible and that every voter can exercise their right to vote.

These scare tactics of criminalizing the election process are modern-day resurrections of the violent suppression tactics used under Jim Crow to preserve white supremacy.

Some examples of this dangerous trend:

- Georgia’s anti-voter S.B. 202 passed in 2021 and made it a crime for anyone other than a caregiver or certain family members to return a person’s ballot. That has put a heavy dependence on those with disabilities and other challenges to now vote in person, adding to the notoriously long lines that occur in Georgia’s urban counties on Election Day and during early voting.
- In Alabama, an extreme “voter integrity” law (S.B. 1) passed in 2024 criminalizes helping voters apply for, fill out and turn in absentee ballots, with felony punishments of up to 20 years in prison. These are the most restrictive policies ever passed and aimed at voters who need help with

absentee ballot applications (who are often Black, elderly, or disabled) and the nonpartisan civic groups that have long mobilized to help citizens participate in elections. Several civil rights and civic organizations have filed legal challenges to the law, pointing out the discriminatory effect for voters of color.

- In Florida, a state task force targeting election-related crimes operates under Gov. Ron DeSantis and made dozens of high-profile arrests shortly before the 2022 midterm election of largely Black Floridians with criminal pasts. Several had been told they were eligible to vote by election offices and many of those voter prosecutions have since been dismissed or dropped.
- Beginning in August 2025, Louisiana will criminalize helping more than one person outside of a person’s immediate family with a mail-in ballot. Disability and civil rights groups protested the bill’s passage, given how this will harm voters with disabilities and those of color who are more likely to face barriers to voting.

### NEXT STEPS

*Legal challenges are underway in several states contesting these enhanced criminal penalties around voting activities. In Alabama, for example, a broad coalition of voting rights, civil rights and disabil-*

*ity rights groups filed a federal lawsuit against Alabama officials for the way S.B. 1 “marginalizes voters’ access to the ballot,” as Benard Simelton, president of the Alabama State Conference of the NAACP, has said.<sup>28</sup>*

*More robust voter protections in place on the federal level would protect voters and civic engagement groups from these anti-democratic threats of retaliatory prosecution.*

## UNFAIR VOTING MAPS

The South leads the country when it comes to gerrymandering—the increasingly brazen attempts by lawmakers to entrench themselves in power by manipulating voting maps by targeting Black and Brown voting communities to do so. These practices erode accountable and responsive government for all voters, who increasingly find themselves in less competitive Congressional and legislative districts. Then comes polarized and dysfunctional state and federal legislatures, out of sync with the priorities of constituents.

**There have been at least 50 major legal challenges filed across the 10 states that make up the South following the 2020 Census cycle,** according to All About Redistricting.<sup>29</sup> That includes racial discrimination challenges for Congressional maps in nine out of 10 Southern states.

This doesn’t occur in other regions of the country in this magnitude and reflects the continued challenges Black Southerners in particular face in having their votes counted equally.

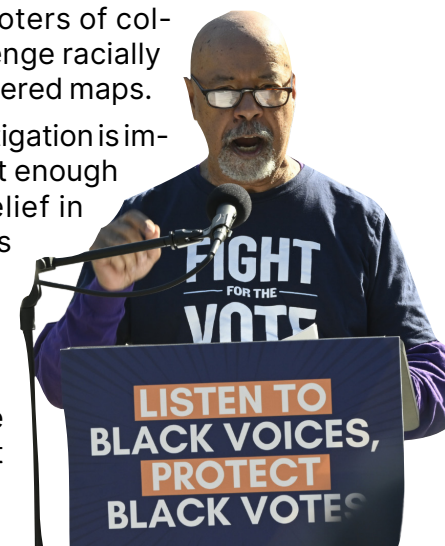
Independent or bipartisan redistricting commissions have been adopted elsewhere in the country, to safeguard against the creation of voting maps that dilute the voting strength of communities of color. But very little of that exists in the

South, with Virginia being the exception after voters chose in 2020 to establish a bipartisan redistricting commission. The commission, however, was unable to find consensus for a fair set of maps in 2021 and the process was taken over by the Virginia Supreme Court.

Among the litigation since 2020:

- In Alabama, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered in *Allen v. Milligan* (2023) that the state must add an additional majority Black congressional district under the Voting Rights Act, which then resulted in an additional Black-majority congressional districts in Louisiana in a separate case.
- A set of gerrymandered maps were thrown out in North Carolina in 2022, replaced by a court-drawn map to be used for one election that resulted in seven Democrats and seven Republicans going to Congress in this purple state. But after the state Supreme Court changed partisan majority in 2023, they greenlight North Carolina lawmakers to re-gerrymander the maps in 2023 at the expense of Black voters throughout the state.
- The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Alexander vs. SC NAACP* (2024), overturned a lower court ruling that found South Carolina lawmakers wrongly “bleached” a district by moving thousands of Black voters to strengthen it for a Republican candidate. The SCOTUS decision narrows the ability of voters of color to challenge racially gerrymandered maps.

Redistricting litigation is important but not enough on its own. Relief in the courts is far from guaranteed in the current climate, and even where successful, it



can take years for courts to act, meaning that voters can be forced to cast ballots under discriminatory maps for several election cycles as they have in Alabama and Louisiana.

**NEXT STEPS**

*On the state level, SOLVE partners and other pro-democracy groups are advocating for non-partisan or independent redistricting commissions that would reduce the discriminatory manipulations (and subsequent years of litigation) that have dominated the South for decades. In California, for example, the state moved to an independent redistricting commission in 2008 and has all but stopped litigation over voting maps.*

*Federal legislation like the Freedom to Vote Act would also standardize the redistricting process, and ban partisan redistricting. That would go a long way in protecting communities of color who are often targeted to create gerrymanders that heavily favor one party or the other.*

*There also needs to be work done in advance of the 2030 Census, to ensure everyone in underserved communities are counted and then represented when the redistricting process starts over again.*

**PRISON GERRYMANDERING**

Prison gerrymandering is the distortion to representation that occurs when voting maps are drawn using Census numbers that count incarcerated individuals where they are being imprisoned — instead of in their home communities, where they will most often return.

What results is a weakening of the “one-person, one-vote” principle when districts are drawn that account for those individuals living in prisons or jails, even though those incarcerated on felonies are unable to vote in any Southern states. Communities surrounding

**RESOURCE**

**ANTI-PRISON GERRYMANDERING: TOOLS FOR ADVOCATES**

From SCSJ, an array of English and Spanish advocacy resources to counter prison gerrymandering, including background, talking points, and social media graphics.



SCSJ <https://bit.ly/4cV205r>

correctional facilities, which are often in rural, white areas, end up with more voting power, while the voting strength of Black and Brown communities are further weakened by the dilutive effect of counting those people away from their actual homes.

The South is affected by this imbalance more so than other regions, given higher incarceration rates, according to the Sentencing Project.

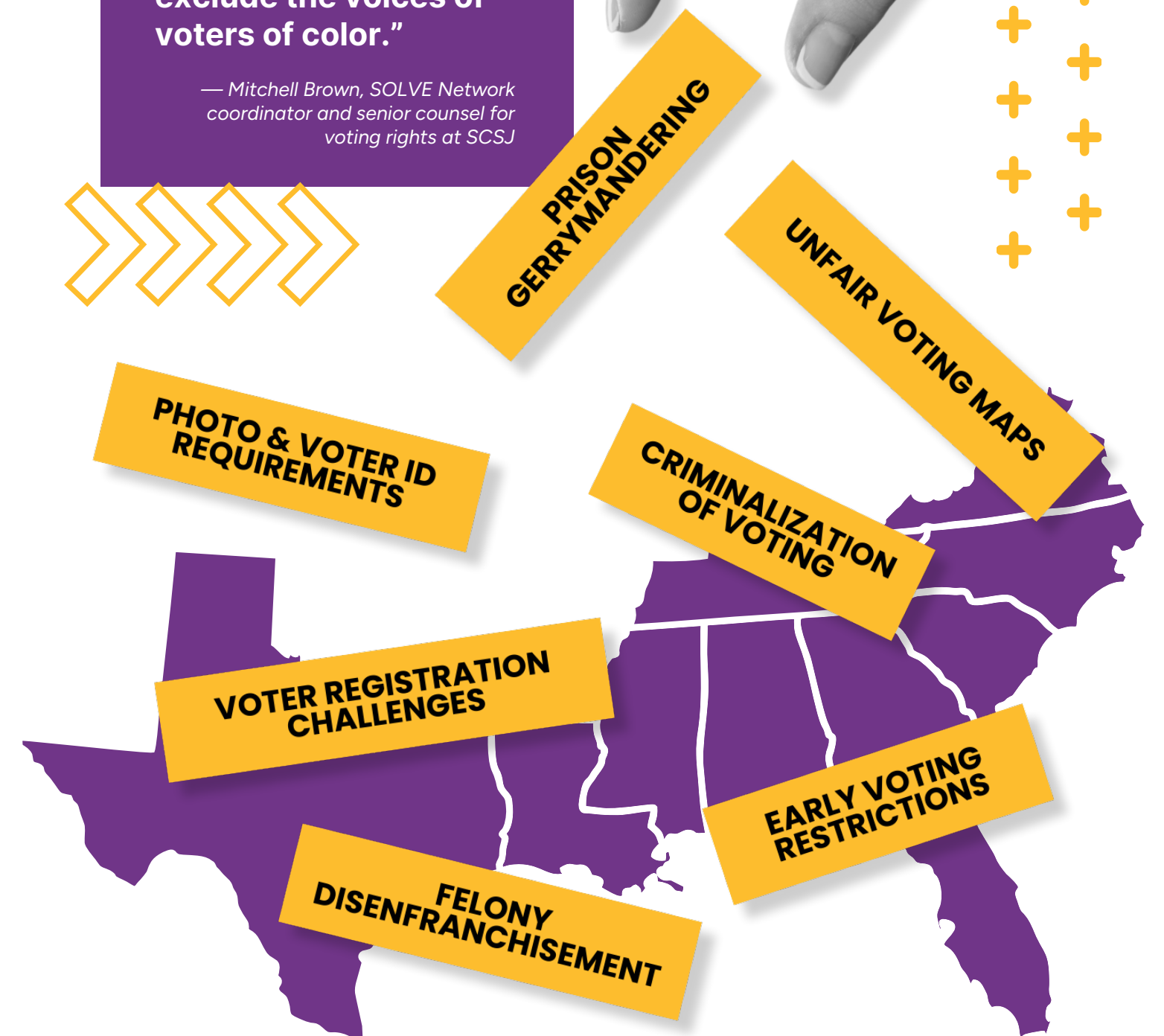
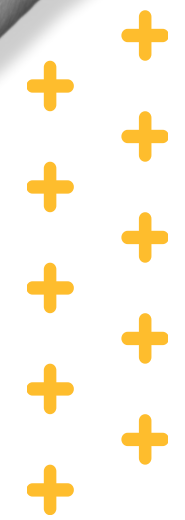
**NEXT STEPS**

*The U.S. Census could fix this issue, by taking steps to count those incarcerated in their home communities, just as they do for members of the military and college students who are temporarily displaced.*



“Our government is supposed to be of, by and for the people, but what history shows us is that those in power will do anything to exclude the voices of voters of color.”

— Mitchell Brown, SOLVE Network coordinator and senior counsel for voting rights at SCSJ



FINDING

# SOLUTIONS

This all adds up to a regional assault on voting rights, with few opportunities ahead for voters to loosen these suppressive tactics. These issues are compounded by a U.S. Supreme Court deadset on rolling back race-based protections for voters through recent anti-democracy opinions and a Congress so beset by partisan logjams that comprehensive and updated voter protections remain elusive.

But that has rightly not deterred those on the ground in states across the South — today’s civil rights activists who are refusing to give up on this country’s yet to be delivered promise of equity. The push for justice has been multipronged, from work to get eligible voters to cast their ballot, to fighting these suppressive policies in the courtrooms, and to pushing back against bad legislation in state legislatures.

**“Organizing our communities is even more important at this stage of the game,”** said Anita Cunningham, a North Carolina-based community organizer. We are “making sure we give [voters] everything that they need, making sure they have access to the information to be able to get there to vote and make sure that they are supported and not intimidated.”

There have been wins, none of them insignificant. **But with no signs of attacks on the vote abating in the South, what is critically needed are voting protections.**

Protections at the state level are gaining momentum, with codified voting protections the law of the land in Virginia, as well as non-Southern states such

## WINS FOR VOTING ACCESS

- Alabama voters secured an important victory in *Allen v. Milligan*, a U.S. Supreme Court decision reinforcing a critical piece of the Voting Rights Act and allowed for two majority Black-Congressional districts in the state.
- In Georgia, a federal judge in 2023 struck down a portion of a sweeping anti-voter law that would have made it a crime to hand out water and food to those waiting in long Election Day lines.
- Virginia saw tremendous gains after the 2020 election in terms of voting access, with same-day voter registration, expanded early voting, and more lenient vote-by-mail processes in place. It also passed a state-level Voting Rights Act, preserving these protections.
- In North Carolina, a federal judge found that district attorneys couldn’t enforce a racist 1877 law that criminalized honest mistakes and misunderstandings about voter eligibility while serving on probation or parole for a prior felony conviction (even in cases where people were told by election workers it was okay to vote).
- South Carolina expanded early voting in 2022, allowing for two weeks of voting before Election Day without having to provide a reason.



South Carolinians called on the U.S. Supreme Court in 2023 to protect Black votes.

as California, Connecticut, New York, Minnesota, Oregon and Washington, according to the Legal Defense Fund.

Florida advocates saw a state-level Voting Rights Act introduced in 2023, a chance to call on lawmakers to expand access to the ballot instead of restricting access. The Harry T. and Harriette V. Moore Voting Rights Act of Florida, named for a couple active in Florida’s civil rights movement who were killed by Ku Klux Klan members in 1951, is expected to be re-introduced next year.

Going beyond that, the **John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act**, named for the civil rights hero and late Georgia congressman, would update and re-establish the pre-clearance measures that kept discriminatory practices at bay for so long. Companion legislation like the **Freedom to Vote and the Native American Voting Rights Acts** would create universal standards around federal elections, including making Election Day a holiday, guaranteeing early voting hours, and allowing those who are no longer incarcerated to restore their rights to vote as well as improve access to the

ballot on Tribal lands.

Passage of previous iterations of the voting protections has always garnered bipartisan support, a sign of support for a healthy democracy committed to being accessible to all.

SOLVE, and the 200-plus grassroots members in our network, urge Congress to make every effort to pass these bills and protect our democracy from those that are seeking to move us away from the goals of equity we hold dear in our nation.



**I Can't  
Vote in  
this State**



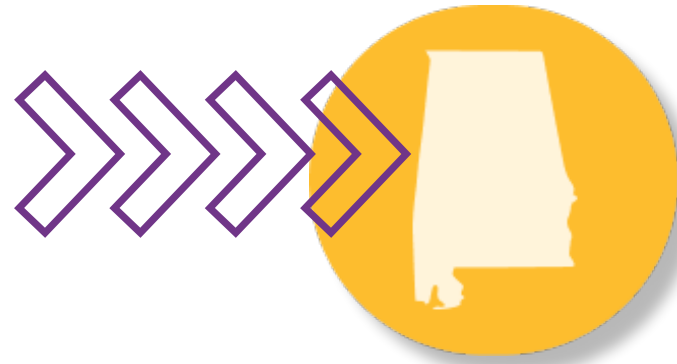
STATE-BY-STATE REVIEW OF

## VOTING ACCESS

As part of the research for the State of the South Report, we conducted interviews with voters and voting rights advocates across the South. What follows is a glimpse of what these barriers to the ballot box look like from the perspective of the people on the ground directly affected by them.

CRIMINALIZATION OF VOTING

# ALABAMA



Alabama already makes it unnecessarily difficult to vote — with no early voting options, strict restrictions on who can vote by mail and a cruel and violent history of upholding white supremacy through voter suppression.

But the state doubled down this year by passing an extreme law that criminalizes the process of helping others with absentee ballots.

Known as S.B.1, the first bill passed in 2024 by the Republican-led Alabama legislature would send a person to prison for up to 20 years on a felony charge if they were paid to help a non-relative request, fill out, or deliver an absentee ballot.

**It's among the most restrictive of the "ballot harvesting" bills that have emerged in recent years** by those perpetuating the false narrative of rampant

voter fraud. It's also a prime example of how tactics to criminalize the voting process are spreading across the South in response to growing Black and Brown political power.

"It's very aggressive and very mean spirited," said Beverly Cooper, co-founder of the non-partisan Stand Up Mobile, of the way the criminalization targets organizations that empower Black voters.

Groups like Stand Up Mobile, which is concentrated on building Black political power, and other Get Out the Vote organizations have pulled back on their plans this election year to help voters that need to vote absentee or by mail, said Shalela Dowdy, a founding president of Stand Up Mobile.

Dowdy testified at a Congressional field hearing on voting rights held in March

**"They realize and recognize this is just one more tactic that they have put in place to keep us away from the voting booth. This is why it's important for us to go and vote."**

Amelia Bacon, Stand Up Mobile.



about the discriminatory effect of the new law on Black communities.

Alabama is one of just three states without early voting options, making absentee voting critical for those who face mobility limitations or other challenges in getting to their polling place on Election Day.

Dowdy pointed out that Black households in Alabama are less likely to have access to the Internet and computer access than white households. Additionally one in 10 Black households are without a car — all barriers to voting in a state like Alabama.

"Black voters are more likely to need access to the absentee voting process,

but Alabama law has made it more burdensome for them to use it compared to white voters," Dowdy said.

On top of that, voting absentee by mail can be confusing, with a need to have two witnesses sign a form and specific instructions about how a ballot can be prepared and sent in so that it will be counted. Nonpartisan voter education groups like Stand Up Mobile and community members have traditionally helped people navigate the process.

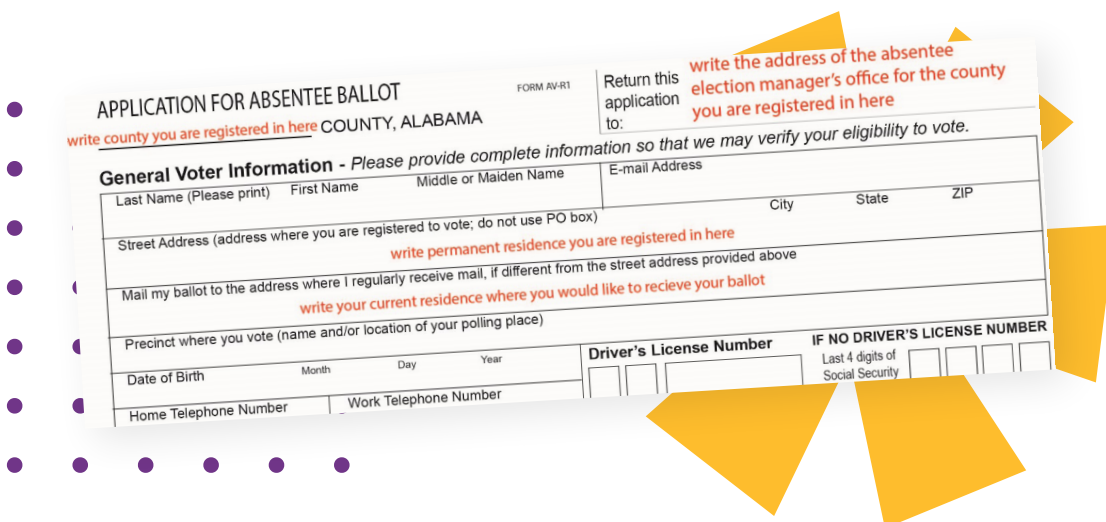
Alabama is also a three-strikes state, and a conviction of this charge could send a person with a criminal past to prison for life. All for helping others exercise their fundamental right to vote.

VOTING ACCESS STATS AND BARRIERS\*

- 33%** of eligible voters are NOT registered to vote
- 4%** turnout gap between Black and white voters
- 45%** voter turnout in 2022
- 15%** youth voter turnout in 2022

- NO** same-day voter registration
- ALLOWS** online voter registration
- NO** early voting
- REQUIRES** reason to vote by mail
- PHOTO ID** requirement to vote

\*See pages 12-13 for sources and more info.





FELONY DISENFRANCHISEMENT

# FLORIDA



Rosemary McCoy has a voter registration card, but hasn't voted since 2018. The Jacksonville woman is one of 1.5 million Floridians considered "returning citizens" whose right to vote has been under attack in the state. She worries of arrest if she were to vote.

McCoy, who leads the grassroots Harriet Tubman Freedom Fighters in Jacksonville, said all of this change along with other anti-voter measures targeting those who do voter registration work, have left a situation where people are afraid or reluctant to vote.

**"How do you destroy democracy? One bite at a time, and they're biting and biting and biting away our democracy. I'm just hoping that the people wake up."**

*Rosemary McCoy, Harriet Tubman Freedom Fighters*

"I am a taxpayer, but I don't have representation, and I don't have a voice," said McCoy. "I feel voiceless about issues that matter to me."

This comes despite nearly 65% of Floridians declaring in a historic 2018 referendum that the right to vote should be reinstated for those like McCoy, who completed the terms of their prison sentence. But Gov. Ron DeSantis, a few months later, signed a law that required all fines and fees to be paid back before the right to vote would be restored — a major setback that has disenfranchised an estimated 900,000 people. Compounding the issue is that the state's convoluted court system has no way of easily telling people what they owe.

She is pushing in her community to explain what issues are at stake, to give people incentive to exercise their right to vote. This fall's election includes measures to legalize recreational use of marijuana and guarantee the right to an abortion — two issues that she hopes bring voters out in large numbers on top of the presidential election.



# 1.15 million people unable to vote because of felony convictions



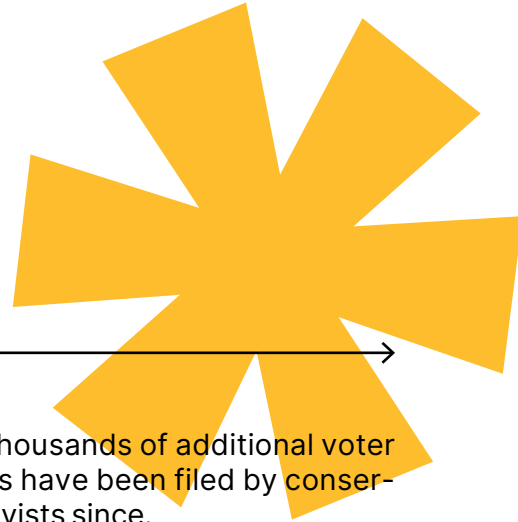
## VOTING ACCESS STATS AND BARRIERS\*

- 37%** of eligible voters are NOT registered to vote
- 10%** turnout gap between Latinx and white voters
- 49%** voter turnout in 2022
- 22%** youth voter turnout in 2022

- NO** same-day voter registration
- ALLOWS** online voter registration
- ALLOWS** early voting
- ANY** eligible voter can vote-by-mail
- PHOTO ID** requirement to vote

\*See pages 12-13 for sources and more info.

# GEORGIA



Jocelyne Soto from Mi Familia Vota has only been in Georgia for one election cycle but already sees the barriers keeping voters of color from the polls.

Language access can be an enormous issue, with a lack of readily accessible information for people who want to be engaged, Soto said. She finds that most counties do include voter information in different languages, but the information can be inaccurate at times and lead to confusion for voters.

Georgia, which has some of the highest voter turnout in the South, has also been at the epicenter of election denialism, after President Joe Biden narrowly defeated Donald Trump in the 2020 election.

Trump and campaign supporters then attempted to overturn those results, by pressuring Georgia election officials to “find” 11,000 votes to help Trump in an attempt to undermine the will of Georgia voters.

But since then, there has been a huge uptick in mass-voter challenges, as Georgia allows everyday citizens who lack firsthand knowledge of basis to dispute eligibility to challenge the registration of voters in the state. A right-wing group out of Texas, called True the Vote, challenged the eligibility of 364,000 Georgians prior to two U.S. Senate runoffs

in 2021. Thousands of additional voter challenges have been filed by conservative activists since.

Though most of these have been dismissed, the Latinx population suffers from these baseless challenges, Soto said. She believes it has a ripple effect on civic engagement and voter access when people are unfairly targeted, making people less likely to exercise their freedom to vote.

Despite that, she believes Georgians will still show up in large numbers to vote this election, given the foundation the state has as a civil rights epicenter and the robust voter registration efforts in recent years.



# Georgia has been the epicenter of election denialism.



**“Georgians aren’t scared, they’re just ready to take action.”**

*Jocelyne Soto, Mi Familia Vota*

## VOTING ACCESS STATS AND BARRIERS\*

- 31%** of eligible voters are NOT registered to vote
- 6.5%** turnout gap between Black and white voters
- 57%** voter turnout in 2022
- 26%** youth voter turnout in 2022

- NO** same-day voter registration
- ALLOWS** online voter registration
- ALLOWS** early voting
- ANY** eligible voter can vote-by-mail
- PHOTO ID** requirement to vote



\*See pages 12-13 for sources and more info.

UNFAIR VOTING MAPS

# LOUISIANA



The voting power of Black voters has long been diminished in Louisiana from unfair voting maps that packed much of the state’s Black population into a single Congressional district that ran from Baton Rouge to New Orleans.

“We are oppressed,” said Dauda Sesay, of Baton Rouge, who founded the Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants, about the state of Black voters like himself. “At some point, you go and vote and look at who is there. It’s someone that doesn’t represent you or your community.”

Nearly a third of Louisiana’s eligible voters are Black, and the 2020 Census had shown the state’s Black population grew while the white population decreased.

Despite that, Louisiana’s legislature initially passed a congressional map in 2022 that limited Black voters’ representation to only one out of six congressional districts — until a coalition of voting rights advocates challenged that imbalance in court.

In response to years of civil rights litigation, the Republican-led legislature created a set of voting maps that gave Black voters in Louisiana the power to decide two Congressional seats. The victory rested on the U.S. Supreme Court’s welcome decision in *Allen v. Milligan* (2023) to keep intact a critical piece of the Voting Rights Act protecting voters of color in gerrymandering cases.

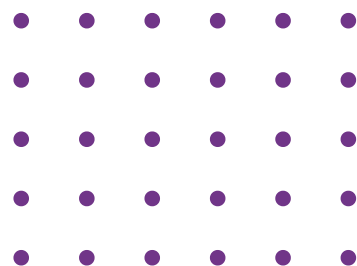
This victory may be short lived, however.

The U.S. Supreme Court indicated they may take another racial gerrymandering challenge after the 2024 election — this time from white voters claiming they are being harmed by the creation of a second district where Black voters have the ability to elect a candidate of choice.

In the meantime, voters in Louisiana will, for the first time ever, head to the polls this fall with the chance to elect two Black members of Congress.

(Note: Louisiana’s election process differs for all but presidential races in that open primaries will be held Nov. 5 this fall with candidates from multiple parties. If no candidate secures the majority of votes, a general election will be held in December between the two candidates with the most votes.)

The experience of seeking fair voting maps in Louisiana exemplifies how “justice delayed is justice denied,” as voters end up subjected to discriminatory voting maps for one or more election cycles, as they were in 2022, while complex redistricting litigation takes years to wind through the courts. During that time, communities of color have less of a say in the issues that matter to them — from affordable health care to climate justice policies to voting rights protections.



“If we want the state to be representative of all, we need to invest so that people’s voices can be heard.”

*Dauda Sesay, Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants*



VOTING ACCESS STATS AND BARRIERS\*

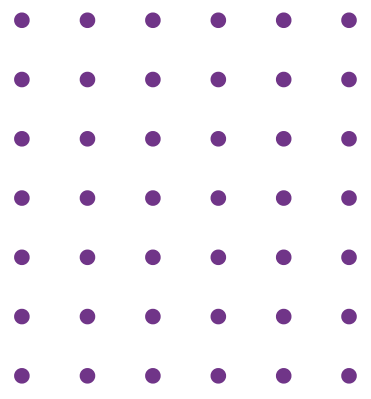
- 32%** of eligible voters are NOT registered to vote
- 7%** turnout gap between Black and white voters
- 48%** voter turnout in 2022
- 16%** youth voter turnout in 2022

- NO** same-day voter registration
- ALLOWS** online voter registration
- ALLOWS** early voting
- REQUIRES** reason to vote by mail
- PHOTO ID** requirement to vote

\*See pages 12-13 for sources and more info.

VOTE-BY-MAIL BARRIERS

# MISSISSIPPI



Mississippi stood out for the scale of oppression and racism during the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras that Black Mississippians faced, and the staunch and violent refusal of white segregationists to comply with desegregation orders.

Fast forward to today, and a strong undercurrent of oppression and white supremacy still runs throughout the state, where 37% of the population identifies as Black. This oppression plays out in the numerous obstacles Mississippians face in obtaining equal access to the ballot, unfair voting maps that diminish the voting strength of Mississippi's Black communities, and the spiraling effects stemming from high rates of poverty. **Nearly one out of every five people in Mississippi lives beneath the poverty line, which is among the worst in the nation, according to the U.S. Census.**

"Being in states like ours, it forces you to always just stay in a state of crisis," says Nsombi Lambright-Haynes, executive director of One Voice Mississippi.

The state has some of the biggest barriers to voting, without any early voting or online voter registration options.

That leaves most people only able to vote in-person on Election Day. While the state does let some people vote absentee, either in-person at election departments or by mail, they must have a reason to do so, such as being out of

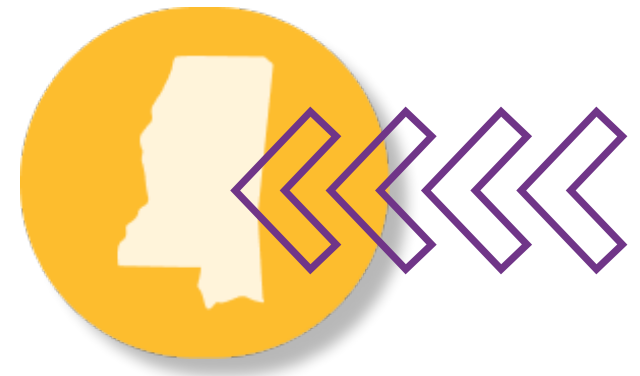
the area on the day of the election for school or work, having disabilities or being over 65. Drop-boxes for ballots were also prohibited this year.

Sharon Wofford lives in DeSoto County and has been working in her community to improve access to the ballot, as well as serving as a poll worker since she was 18.

She's particularly worried about the barriers that exist for young voters and college students, with Mississippi's lack of same-day voter registration options and a vote-by-mail process.

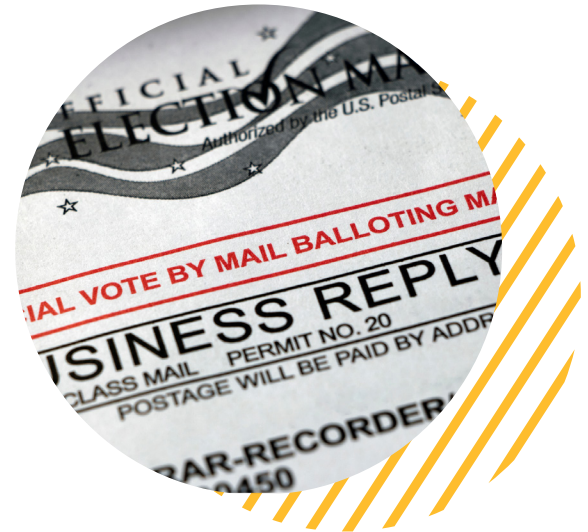
"You really only get that one shot really to vote in the state of Mississippi on Election Day," she said. "That's the biggest piece that we're trying to push in the state of Mississippi — get early voting here."

Her children, when they were in college, requested absentee ballots so they could vote while studying out-of-state. In one instance, the ballot never arrived



and, in the other, a worker at Wofford's county election's department falsely stated that a person needed to request that ballot in person.

On top of that, Mississippi requires a notary to witness an absentee ballot. When her son was studying in South Carolina, he had to go off-campus to a bank to find someone to notarize his ballot. Having that many hoops to jump through keeps too many from exercising what is their right — their freedom to vote.



**"We have citizens in this state who are really pounding the pavement. They are reaching out to one person at a time, community by community, having those conversations and to erode away the stigma that Mississippi has. But there is always work still to be done."**

*Sharon Wofford, of DeSoto County, Miss.*

VOTING ACCESS STATS AND BARRIERS\*

<b>27%</b>	of eligible voters are NOT registered to vote	<b>NO</b> same-day voter registration	+
<b>1%</b>	turnout gap between Black and white voters	<b>NO</b> online voter registration	+
<b>46%</b>	voter turnout in 2022	<b>NO</b> early voting	+
<b>20%</b>	youth voter turnout in 2022	<b>REQUIRES</b> reason to vote by mail	+
		<b>PHOTO ID</b> requirement to vote	+

\*See pages 12-13 for sources and more info.

# NORTH CAROLINA

**“We do need your voice, because that’s the only way that change is going to happen.”**

*Anita Cunningham, N.C. Disaster Resilience and Response Network*

The logistical challenges facing people in the rural South can make it impossible for many to overcome the barriers to the ballot.

Anita Cunningham knows this all too well, as she works in her corner of Southeastern North Carolina to help people understand that their futures and democracy are at stake, and how they can have their voices heard. Cunningham leads two community-focused non-profits in her Robeson County community, Community Partners Across the South and N.C. Disaster Resilience and Response Network.

“People feel like that, because of how the laws and the systems are, that their vote

doesn’t count anyway,” Cunningham said. “They look at it like it really doesn’t matter, because it’s not going to mean anything.”

North Carolina passed a slew of changes to its voting laws in advance of the 2024 election, many of which were challenged in court for what are anticipated to be discriminatory effects.

Voters are now required to present a photo ID, and those voting by mail must provide a photocopy of their identification with their ballot. Also gone is a three-day grace period for mail-in ballots that allowed those ballots to be counted so long as they were postmarked before polls closed on Election Day.

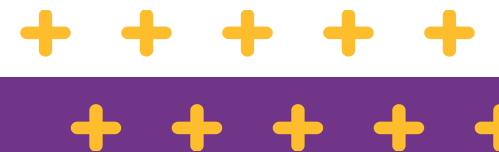
This amounts to barriers that many won’t overcome in areas like Robeson County.

Robeson County is one of the most diverse in the state, with its population roughly divided between Native members of the Lumbee Tribe, Black residents and white communities.

It’s also the state’s poorest county. Hurricanes in recent years slashed the amount of safe, affordable housing in the area, and many people are more focused on how to get by each day than how their freedom to vote has been attacked.



# NC voters are now required to have a photo ID.\*\*



## VOTING ACCESS STATS AND BARRIERS\*

- 39%** of eligible voters are NOT registered to vote
- 6.5%** turnout gap between Black and white voters
- 45%** voter turnout in 2022
- 23%** youth voter turnout in 2022

- ALLOWS** same-day voter registration during early voting
- ALLOWS** online voter registration
- ALLOWS** early voting
- ANY** eligible voter can vote-by-mail
- PHOTO ID** requirement to vote\*\*

\*See pages 12-13 for sources and more info.

\*\* Those without IDs can cast a provisional ballot.

VOTING BARRIERS FOR THOSE WITH DISABILITIES

# SOUTH CAROLINA

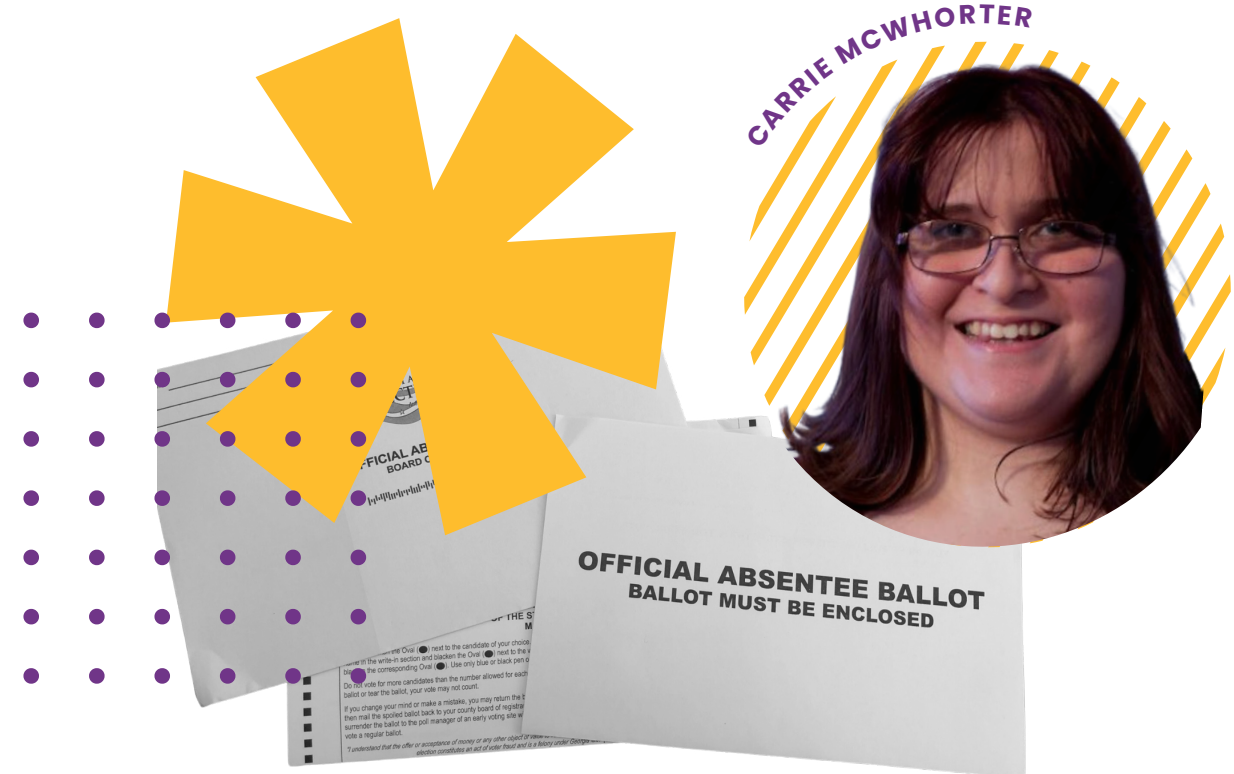
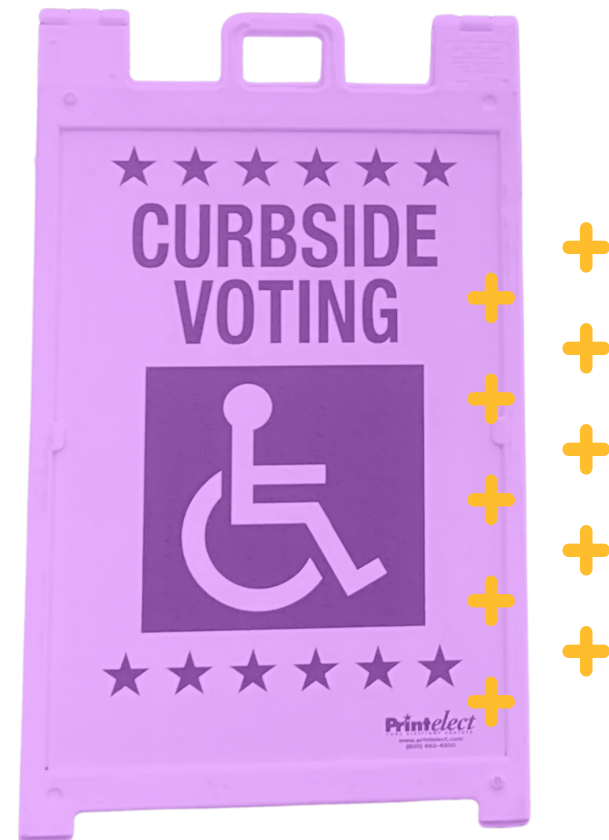
South Carolina continues to fail voters with disabilities, said Carrie McWhorter, a policy manager for New Disabled South based in South Carolina.

Curbside voting is supposed to be available to any South Carolina voter who, whether from a disability or being over 65, has difficulty entering a polling place or is unable to stand in line to vote.

But many polling places are understaffed or poll workers aren't trained on how to properly respond to voters in need of curbside voting, she said.

Meanwhile, the legislature is considering making it even harder, by forcing voters to prove they need accessible voting options instead of making curbside voting access universal.

Beyond this, those with disabilities face additional barriers when it comes to voting by mail, which now requires voters to phone or email their elections office to order an absentee ballot instead of being able to request one online.



**“Consider disabled voters in our data and the policies you make. We do vote. We’re here. We’re not going anywhere. We should have the access to vote.”**

*Carrie McWhorter, New Disabled South*



VOTING ACCESS STATS AND BARRIERS\*

- 36%** of eligible voters are NOT registered to vote
- 7%** turnout gap between Black and white voters
- 45%** voter turnout in 2022
- 18%** youth voter turnout in 2022

- NO** same-day voter registration
- ALLOWS** online voter registration
- ALLOWS** early voting
- REQUIRES** reason to vote by mail
- PHOTO ID** requirement to vote

\*See pages 12-13 for sources and more info.



LOW VOTER TURNOUT

# TENNESSEE

**“We are the change we want to see. If our votes didn’t matter they wouldn’t try so hard to stop us.”**

*Tequila Johnson, The Equity Alliance*

Tequila Johnson, co-founder and CEO of the Equity Alliance in Tennessee sees her state as “ground zero for access to voting.”

She’s not wrong. The state had the lowest voter turnout in the 2022 midterms elections, and the lowest youth voter turnout in the country, with just 13% of young voters coming out to exercise their right to vote.

The reasons why are multi-pronged. Tennessee makes people register to vote at least 30 days in advance of an election. Voters routinely receive incorrect information about their polling places, and then there are strict rules as to who can vote-by-mail. On top of that, there is only a narrow path to restore voting rights after felony convictions, which has left nearly 9% of the state’s voting population and 20% of the state’s Black population unable to vote.<sup>29</sup>

All of this has left Black and non-Black voters of color unable to fully exercise their rights to vote, the same communities that suffer the most from discriminatory gerrymandering.

Johnson would like to see a full restoration of the Voting Rights Act with Tennessee included as a state that would require preclearance of any election law changes to ensure people’s voting rights are respected.



# In 2022, Tennessee had the lowest youth voter turnout in the country.

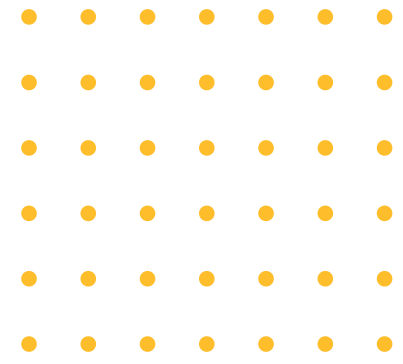


### VOTING ACCESS STATS AND BARRIERS\*

- 33%** of eligible voters are NOT registered to vote
- 2%** turnout gap between Black and white voters
- 45%** voter turnout in 2022
- 13%** youth voter turnout in 2022

- NO** same-day voter registration
- ALLOWS** online voter registration
- ALLOWS** early voting
- REQUIRES** reason to vote by mail
- PHOTO ID** requirement to vote

*\*See pages 12-13 for sources and more info.*



OBSTACLES TO REGISTERING AND VOTING

# TEXAS

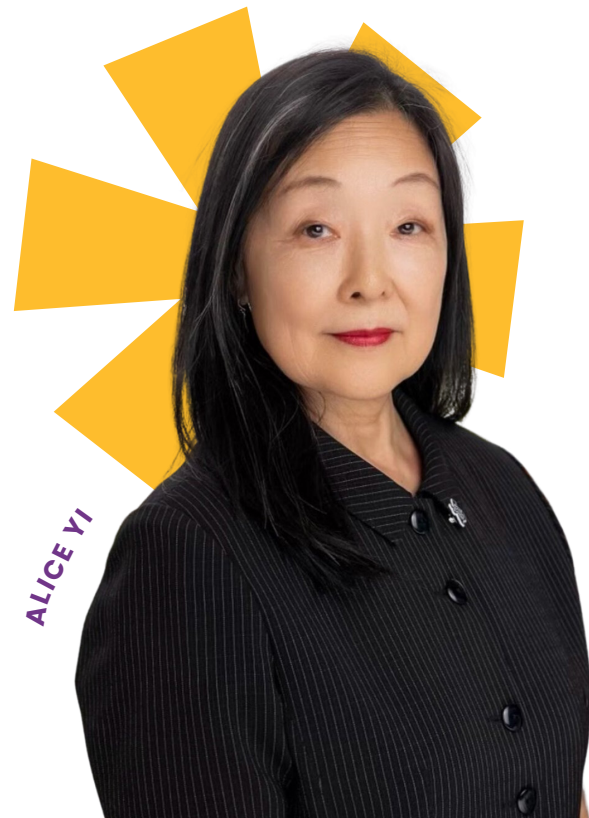
Alice Yi, co-founder of Asian Texans for Justice, has seen many in the Asian community face challenges voting because of confusing mail-in voting rules, language access issues and barriers to voter registration.

Texas is one of just seven states where people cannot register to vote online, requiring people to fill out paper forms and deliver them to county election offices, which can be difficult in a state known for its open space and lack of robust public transportation.

The state also doesn't allow people to register to vote during early voting or on Election Day — a barrier that keeps too many from exercising their right to vote.

"High tech companies are concentrated in Texas, but you cannot register to vote online," she said.

The change Yi wants to see? "Make it easier to register to vote. Add more polling locations to give the working class more opportunities to vote."



ALICE YI

**"Voter suppression is everywhere without you knowing it."**

Alice Yi, Asian Texans for Justice



# Texas is 1 of 7 states where people can't register to vote online.



VOTING ACCESS STATS AND BARRIERS\*

- 35%** of eligible voters are NOT registered to vote
- 8.2%** turnout gap between Black and white voters
- 47%** voter turnout in 2022
- 22%** youth voter turnout in 2022

- NO** same-day voter registration
- NO** online voter registration
- ALLOWS** early voting
- REQUIRES** reason to vote by mail
- PHOTO ID** requirement to vote

\*See pages 12-13 for sources and more info.



# VIRGINIA

Virginia has been an outlier in the South when it comes to voting rights, after seeing access to the ballot improved in recent years.

“Before 2020, access to the ballot was pretty difficult for a lot of people in my community,” said Marcia “Cia” Price, a Newport News-based Delegate for the 85th District in the Virginia House of Delegates and director of the Virginia Black Leadership Organizing Collaborative (BLOC).

Since 2020, Virginia has added same-day voter registration, expanded early voting options and now allows people to vote by mail if they wish, eliminating a previous requirement to provide excuses.

A state-level Voting Rights Act was also enacted in 2021, the only one in the South. Those advances came after a slate of candidates who wanted to see more pro-voter policies were elected to the state legislature.

One of the most significant has been having same-day voter registration, as has the increased access to curbside voting.

That forward momentum has, unfortunately, stopped. Elected in 2022, Gov. Glenn

Youngkin has vetoed multiple pro-democracy reforms building on the prior advances. His office also rescinded a prior policy to restore voting rights in a routine fashion, and now there is only the narrowest of paths to having voting rights restored after a felony conviction. On top of that, the state has struggled to maintain its voter lists and inappropriately purged 3,000 voters weeks before a 2023 election.

While there is plenty of work to be done in Virginia, the state is still an example to others in the South about what change is possible.

**“You can’t let up or it’ll never happen.”**

*Cia Price, Virginia Black Leadership Organization Collaborative*



# Virginia is the only Southern state where a person can register to vote and cast their ballot on Election Day.



## VOTING ACCESS STATS AND BARRIERS\*

- 26%** of eligible voters are NOT registered to vote
- 3.5%** turnout gap between Black and white voters
- 53%** voter turnout in 2022
- 23%** youth voter turnout in 2022

- ALLOWS** same-day voter registration
- ALLOWS** online voter registration
- ALLOWS** early voting
- ANY** eligible voter can vote-by-mail
- VOTER ID** requirement to vote

\*See pages 12-13 for sources and more info.

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JOIN US IN OUR EFFORTS TO

# PROTECT DEMOCRACY IN THE SOUTH.

The Southern Leadership for Voter Engagement (SOLVE) network is a multi-state collaborative of more than 200 grassroots organizations dedicated to sharing strategies, resources and support in the ongoing struggle to protect and expand voting rights. As a Southern Coalition for Social Justice project, the non-partisan SOLVE network is a space for Southern grassroots and Southern state-based organizations to address, respond to and rectify policies that have weakened the voting strength of communities.

### WANT TO JOIN US AT SOLVE?

Contact us at [solve@scsj.org](mailto:solve@scsj.org).

**SOLVE WEBSITE**  
[www.solvenetwork.org](http://www.solvenetwork.org)

**SCSJ WEBSITE**  
[www.southerncoalition.org](http://www.southerncoalition.org)



### RESOURCE

## ELECTION PROTECTION RESOURCES

A coalition of non-partisan organizations and volunteers organized by the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights are available to answer voters' questions on all aspects of voting, including registration, absentee and early voting, casting a ballot at the polls, and overcoming obstacles to voter participation.  
[www.866ourvote.org](http://www.866ourvote.org)

**ENGLISH**  
866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683)

**SPANISH/ENGLISH**  
888-VE-Y-VOTA (888-839-8682)

**ASIAN LANGUAGES/ENGLISH**  
888-API-VOTE (888-274-8683)

**ARABIC/ENGLISH**  
844-YALLA-US (844-925-5287)

### STAY INFORMED

## SOLVE/SCSJ NEWSLETTERS

Sign up to receive newsletters from the SOLVE Network and Southern Coalition for Social Justice.

<https://bit.ly/3LFQLm4>



# VOTE LIKE THE SOUTH DEPENDS ON IT



# LISTEN TO BLACK VOICES, PROTECT BLACK VOTES



# VOTE



Like the **SOUTH**  
depends on it!

## ABOUT SOLVE

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**SOLVE**